

Ash Wednesday

“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” *Isaiah 58:12*

“Lord, who throughout these forty days
for us didst fast and pray,
teach us with thee to mourn our sins
and close by thee to stay.”

“Lord Who throughout These Forty Days” vs. 1, by Claudia F. Hernaman

As we enter the season of Lent, we are reminded yet again to pray and to fast... to pray and to act... it is more than praying on its own. Images of prayer fill my mind... traditional ones... head down, eyes closed, and speaking quietly to God. But there are so many other images we can consider... prayers with action... praying and planting trees... praying and walking.

Living in the greater Bethlehem area... we pray and we act. Last week, we planted trees as a response to prayer in action. Trees had been uprooted in a valley, and the response by the Palestinian Christian family was to replant and to plant more trees.* This season of Lent, what are the ways you too can pray and act? The Palm Sunday palms have become the ashes... the destruction of trees has become the opportunity for grace through action.

Amazing and ever loving God, as we begin the season of Lent, may we be reminded through your grace how we are to love through prayers and action. Amen.

*-Rev. Kristen L. Brown
Global Ministries Mission Liaison to Palestine and Israel*

*Post note: for more information about the Nassar family, please check out their web site www.tentofnations.org

In May 2014 some 1800 trees were uprooted during the night in the valley of their farm land. This happened days before the apricot harvest. The variety of trees uprooted included apricot, olive, grape vines, apple, and almonds. The winter months are the tree planting time... so each Saturday, weather permitting, people gather to help replant trees, the hope it to plant some 3000 fruit trees to replace those which were uprooted.

Sadly these kinds of things happen in too many places in the West Bank of Occupied Palestine.

First Sunday in Lent

“Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness’ sake, O LORD!” *Psalm 25:6-7*

“As thou with Satan didst contend,
and didst the victory win,
O give us strength in thee to fight,
in thee to conquer sin.”

“Lord Who throughout These Forty Days” vs. 2, by Claudia F. Hernaman

Lent is a time for exploration of the relationship between humanity and God. Throughout this season of Lent, we are called to remember Christ’s temptation in the wilderness and similarly cleanse our lives from sin. It is a time to free ourselves from the habits that keep us from a deeper communion with God, others, and the earth.

As we prepare our hearts and minds for Easter, the psalmist reminds us that God’s grace is “of old.” The steadfast love of God is older than our sins, personal or collective. It is older and more powerful than any hate-filled word and this Occupation. Indeed, it is the very constant throughout salvation history. When the Psalmist cries, “according to your steadfast love remember me,” he is pleading to be remembered as the human that he is, for God to remember him and not his sins.

Yet, Lent is not only how we relate to God but also how we relate to each other. It is our relationships with each other that can either support or dismantle the systems of oppression that God despises. Often, humans cry not just to God but to each other in different ways to be remembered as human. While our society seems to move continuously closer to the comfort of stereotypes and easy answers, we are called to seek and celebrate the humanity in ourselves and in each individual. Even as we work with the marginalized, it is easy to lack nuance in our understanding of both the oppressor and the oppressed. We can too often view the oppressed as blameless victims and the oppressor as heartless monsters. While the roles of oppressor and oppressed may be clear, to view an individual, regardless of their identity, as anything more or less than human is in itself a sin that keeps us from true relationships with God and with the other.

As we journey towards redemption and new life, let us confess our sins to the God that forgives us and cleanses our relationship with God and with others.

Loving and redeeming God, we call to you to remember us by your steadfast love. Look on our humanity and our hearts rather than our sins. Be with us and fill us with your love as we seek to understand the humanity in each of your children. Let our shared humanity be used to bring about a just peace and not used as a means to justify oppression. Amen.

*-Grace Killian
Global Mission Fellow in Palestine and Israel*

Second Sunday in Lent

“For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith... For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” *Romans 4:13, 16-17*

“As thou didst hunger bear, and thirst,
so teach us, gracious Lord,
to die to self, and chiefly live
by thy most holy word.”

“Lord Who throughout These Forty Days” vs. 3, by Claudia F. Hernaman

Paul reminds some of the first members of the church, the Jewish-Gentile congregations in Rome, that faith is the basis of who is in and who is out of the community. And why is faith the basis? So that God’s promises given in the covenant will always be received as a gift and not a reward, and that being part of the covenant will always be available to everyone who shares in the faith.

In reflecting on this passage I thought about how in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, peace is often bandied about as a reward for power (for Israelis) or for submission (for Palestinians.) If Palestinians or the Palestinian Authority would do, or not do, something then peace would be achieved. If Israelis or the Israeli government would do, or not do, something then peace would be achieved.

What if being deserving of peace is not based on behavior, but based on that fact that Palestinians and Israelis are human, and that by being human all are Children of God. Living in peace is not a privilege, though in this world it is often treated as such. Living in peace is how God calls us to be. It is also what God calls us to do so that not only may we live in peace but that all people may live this way. Peace is not a limited commodity!

Regardless of what some Israeli or Palestinians, or even Americans, may or may not do, our working or advocating for peace should not be because we think that some people deserve it, or

don't deserve it. We should work for peace because all people deserve it. Peace is a gift from God intended to be shared by all people.

God, may I live in your peace. May I live a life without violence, but if this may not be so may I live in hope that it could be.

-Rev. Doris Warrell
Former Mission Intern in Palestine and Israel

Third Sunday in Lent

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” *1 Corinthians 1: 18-25*

“And through these days of penitence,
and through thy passiontide,
yea, evermore in life and death,
Jesus, with us abide.”

“Lord Who throughout These Forty Days” vs. 4, by Claudia F. Hernaman

“Christ crucified, God's power and wisdom!”

Humility and foolishness are not something you may put on your resume' if you're looking for a good paying job, but great credentials if you aspire to follow Jesus and are a kingdom seeker! How many of us remember the words of Jesus to his disciples? "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3)

In Bethlehem, the Church of the Nativity, built over the site where it is believed that Christ was born, has hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. At one entrance of the church is a small door, known as the door of humility, which in the Ottoman time was created to keep marauders mounted on horses from entering. It is fitting today that every visitor who enters through this door must stoop down or bend over, just as Christ, the very God who created the universe, bowed low to enter our human existence and then bowed lower by allowing himself to be crucified as a criminal on the cross.

The test of true greatness, it could be argued, is humility. Likewise, the test of true wisdom is arguably to be emptied of human wisdom to make room for God's wisdom. This also requires an act of humility. What actions do I need to take to be emptied of self righteousness, pride, and worldly wisdom? What am I willing to do to know Christ more fully?

As we read in today's scripture the preaching about the cross is foolishness to many people, but to those who believe it is wisdom, and power and might.

Dear God, Thank you for paving the way for us to know you and to be in relationship with you. Through your birth and death on the cross you showed us the way to the father is through humility and self-denial. Lord we receive you as our Savior! Help us to follow your example all the days of our lives. Amen!

-Brenda Awad

Global Ministries Missionary in Palestine and Israel

Fourth Sunday in Lent

“From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.” *Numbers 21:4-9*

“I want Jesus to walk with me,
I want Jesus to walk with me,
All along my pilgrim journey,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me”

“I want Jesus to Walk with me” vs. I, Afro-American spiritual

When I think of Lent, I think of a journey...a journey to the cross but also a journey to new life. So, it's appropriate that one of this week's scriptures is about Moses leading his people on a journey, through the wilderness to a new land beyond. The spiritual journey has been one of my own themes as I've grown over the years in my awareness of God and of God's leading. And these past years, spent in the Holy Land, have seen this idea of journey enhanced by the concept of pilgrimage.

A couple of years ago, as I was participating in a silent retreat, my spiritual director asked me to write a parable of pilgrimage that reflected my own journey. This is what I wrote:

A pilgrim seeker sets out on a journey, not knowing how she will arrive but trusting in the leading of a voice not her own. On the way she meets many challenges, but always feels protected, cared for, not alone. As she continues her journey she encounters people and situations which cause her to reflect on, question and sometimes change her perception of the

world around her. She sees people who are invisible, hears voices that go unheard. She sees God who cares and sees and hears and who invites her to do the same and to share this caring and seeing and hearing with others. As she continues on, she begins to understand that the destination is not just a place but the journey itself.

Lord, during this season of Lent, may we see our lives as a journey with you and for others. May your presence guide us each step that we take. Amen.

*-Tina Whitehead
United Methodist Volunteer in Palestine and Israel*

Fifth Sunday in Lent

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.” *Psalm 51: 1-12*

“Search me, O God,
and know my heart today;
Try me, O Savior,
Know my thoughts, I pray.
See if there be
some wicked way in me;
cleansing me from every sin
and set me free.”

“Search Me, O God”, Psalm 41

To experience the blessings of Resurrection, we are encouraged to face our wrong doings. In this modern world we know how important it is to dial a phone number accurately or write down a password without mistakes. Often a car will not start if the driver fails to press the correct buttons and we can get ourselves in trouble if when travelling we fail to enter the correct pin number of our credit cards. When we use these numbers or passwords, we know that if we make a mistake, even one little mistake, we will not achieve our desired goal. In our digital world there is no room for mistakes. If you miss one number, there is no mercy.

The Bible clearly teaches us that sin can create a wedge between us and God. The good news of the Lent season is that unlike the digital world, we can seek forgiveness and we can receive it. There is no secret password to open the gates of heaven. The same Bible that tells us that our sins have made a barrier between us and God is the same word of God that reveals God's great desire to forgive us. While both the New and Old Testaments teach forgiveness, the New Covenant is built on the fact that Jesus died on the Cross to forgive all our sins. Our role is to confess, repent and believe while God's role is to forgive our sins and reconcile us to himself. In this world of violence, radicalism, selfishness, fanaticism and greed we are not only called to receive forgiveness but we are called to forgive those who do us harm. This exactly what Jesus taught us as we pray, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Matt. 6:12 (NIV)

We cry with King David O Lord "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." As we receive your grace of forgiveness, Lord, we pray for those who transgress against us. Have mercy on them and on us. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen

*-Rev. Alex Awad
Global Ministries Missionary in Palestine and Israel*